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Britain's Great Spy Scandal

Special Correspondence to The Times-Dispatch

By Anthony Lejeune

LONDON — would you believe that the head of the British secret service was a Soviet agent? Well, would you believe that the man who almost became head of the British secret service, and did in fact lead the counterespionage section, was a Soviet agent? You'd better believe it because it's true.

There now seems little doubt that Kim Philby, the "Third Man" in the Burgess and Maclean affair and for many years a senior officer at the heart of MI6, Britain's intelligence organization, was recruited by the Soviets a few months after leaving the university in 1933, and, from then on, passed information regularly to the Communists.

These startling revelations about Philby, far more explicit than anything which was publicly known before, have appeared simultaneously in two British newspapers. They are authenticated by Philby's son, who has just visited him in Moscow.

The British government tried to get them suppressed. The Russians on the other hand, proud of what was indeed a remarkable achievement and ready enough to embarrass the British authorities, probably helped them along a little — which doesn't make them any less true.

Just to rub a bit more salt in the wound, they were preceded a couple of days earlier by the first pictures of that other master spy for the Communists, George Blake, who escaped from prison last year, now apparently happy and well in Moscow.

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THE DAMAGE those two men did is incalculable. Blake betrayed whole hosts of British agents to the Russians. Philby was at one time head of MI6's Washington office, responsible for liaison with the CIA and the FBI.

What conclusions can we draw from these terrible cases? It is fair to say that the most blatant weaknesses in the system were corrected after a searching investigation in 1960. It might also be argued that the damage would have been more

restricted if the links between the British and American intelligence communities had been less close. This may be true, but the price, in terms of over-all usefulness, would be too high to pay. And this argument cuts the other way too; the most valuable spy-catching has been achieved through information passed on from one Western intelligence network to another.

In any protracted war, cold or hot, there will be disasters. These things happen. They happen to the Russians too, if we are to believe the Penkovsky story.

But two sentences from one newspaper account of the Philby affair are worth pondering. He got away with it, The Observer says, because the system of personal contacts and trust which formed the traditional structure of the British secret service failed to take account of the fact that "the events of the thirties had eroded the loyalties of the younger intelligentsia."

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BOTH BLAKE AND PHILBY were ideological traitors — as, from the opposite point of view, was Penkovsky.

What matters is the practical consequence, which some people have still not understood.

Espionage, in the great struggle which divides the modern world, is not a question of sinister foreigners peering through the long grass and sketching gun emplacements. Its vital battles, its fatal subversions, take place in the mind. What we are defending are not just hunks of real estate labelled Britain and America but a set of ideas, of political priorities, which are the conditions of freedom.

The traitors and enemies against whom we must try to protect ourselves are not simply national opponents but men and women, whether inside or outside our own frontiers, who attack, betray and erode those ideas. Not to recognize this danger — to blur it, for example, in a woolly cloud of liberal anti-anti-communism — has become the gravest weakness in any security system.

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